

Meditation on the Reading of Biblical Lessons During Holy Eucharist

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We're at the point in my series of meditations on the liturgy when it's time to talk about the reading of scripture as part of public worship. I would remind you, first, that there is a sense in which the reading and hearing of scripture in public worship is a process of storage, the piling up of impressions, memories, information, for the future. Of course, scripture can have immediate application. But it's repetition Sunday after Sunday after Sunday is part of the process of building up a reserve of knowledge, of familiarity, which may serve us when we need it. It's a little bit like those bridesmaids and their lamps: if you've taken care to store up some knowledge of scripture then it is available inside your head, inside your life, when such things are needed. You won't have to go to the book at midnight, with bleary eyes and a mind of uncertain alertness, to find the passage you need. To need always to look up, well, looking up is good but not the same thing as being able to say, "Ah ha!" and draw on a mind well stored with passages, stories, thoughts, interpretations. What we must look up is not available for that unconscious simmering in the backs of our minds while we go about daily life. The formation of a scriptural foundation depends, yes, on our knowing, but not always or only on being constantly aware that we know. Regular exposure to scripture during Sunday service is one way, the fundamental way, this foundation is built.

The Episcopal Church has, over the past hundred years or so, been altering its worship to insure that its members are exposed to more scripture in public worship and that that exposure takes place in a more systematic way. Those of you who remember the 1928 Book of Common Prayer will recall that in the Eucharist Service we read two lessons: a gospel and one other, usually from the New Testament Epistles, but which would, at a few times of the year, reach out and delicately touch the Old Testament. Unless you were in a quite advanced church you got two lessons, not three. The

third lesson was added during the last revision of the Book of Common Prayer, to encourage Episcopalians, whether or not they are bemused by it, to remember that the Old Testament is, indeed, still a part of scripture and to begin the long, slow process of building an awareness of it among ordinary churchgoers.

As for the more systematic reading of scripture, the movement from a one- to a three-year cycle of Eucharistic readings has enabled a more systematic exploration of a greater variety of scripture. When I was a youngster in the Episcopal Church we had the same cycle of lessons every year. We'd get to the first Sunday of Advent and the same set of readings would start over that we'd had the previous year. We now have one year to devote to each of the three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. This is in recognition that each of these gospels has a different story to tell about Jesus. The old assumption was that each gospel told essentially the same story, so you could mix and match. A true advance of modern critical study of the Bible is the recognition that each gospel gives a unique portrait of Jesus and has a unique theology. The church grows out of the totality of these unique understandings, not out of their homogenization. Our lectionary now recognizes this discovery and allows us to experience it in worship and in lectionary based Bible study.

Comment: They sneak John in with Mark don't they?

Yes, Mark is so much shorter than the other gospels that there isn't quite enough of him to take up a full year. John also sneaks in during Holy Week, for instance his Passion Story is read on Good Friday. You also get him occasionally during Lent and Easter. The point is that the last changes in the Book of Common Prayer give us, in our communal worship, much more exposure to a wider variety of scripture than we had before the 1970's.

The other reason for reading scripture during public worship is that its reading is the absolute core and foundation of the first half of the Eucharist. Three things happen after scripture is read: we say a creed, we pray for the church and the world (The Prayers of the People) and, most of the time, we make a confession. Each of the three is dependent on the content of scripture for both its justification as a part of our worship and for its content.

Now it makes relatively little sense to affirm our faith in God (creed) if we have not been informed about which god it is we are affirming our faith in. The function of scripture is to give God an identity, to tell us which god this God is whom we worship. We are, for instance, affirming a faith in him who calls for justice to roll down like water and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Not the God who says, "Fifteen steers for me this Sunday and twenty next Sunday. If you don't come across, no rain for your

crops and a visitation of the plague this coming spring.” It’s not that god of walking on eggshells lest we offend his caprice that we affirm, but the God of justice and righteousness. We begin the creed saying, “I believe in God the father almighty. . .” And the question is, “Which God is that?” Scripture has the task of developing, constantly renewing, and deepening our sense of which God it is we are affirming when we say the creed. In fact, without something coming from God to us, that is, scripture, to tell us what sort of God we believe in, it doesn’t make much sense to affirm our faith in God, as presented in the creed, at all. So the creed follows the reading of scripture because God has to tell us who he is before we can say, “Yes, that’s who we believe in.”

Going on to the Prayers of the People, I’d like to emphasize again one of the things I mentioned in our discussion of collects, that is, the importance of having some reason to believe God will answer the prayer we present to him. In other words, we are to pray intelligently. That means we pray for things that God might have some interest in granting us. I do not usually pray for the privilege of being able to eat as much as I please with no consequences because no loving God would give me that. It does God no honor to pray that he give us things contrary to his character. Scripture tells us that God is concerned for the whole creation, so in the Prayers of the People we pray for the whole creation. Scripture tells us that God is not just concerned with us, not just for our friends, but for everyone including our enemies, and, therefore, we pray for them. We pray for that which scripture tells us is congruent to the character of God.

But the most important, the foundational thing, is that God is concerned with what happens in this world. Because scripture assures us of this, we are given reason and hope to pray for this world which God loves. But without the constant reminder from scripture that our God is that God who is, in fact, involved with and concerned for the world, it really wouldn’t make much sense to pray for it. Except perhaps, by using the world as a means of convincing God to keep his distance. And there have been plenty of religions which operated that way. Make a sacrifice, not in order to establish a loving relationship with God, but because God is a bit capricious, and we want to give him something so that he stays where he belongs and doesn’t bother us.

The final element of the first half of the service is confession/absolution. In one sense, this has the most obvious relation of all to scripture. If God is only to be satisfied by our being good, then there is no reason to confess. There may be a reason to forget the past and try again, but no reason to confess. But Christianity understands the scriptural claim about God to

show a concern with us even when we aren't good. If this is true, then it makes some sense to confess in the process of restoring and reestablishing a broken relationship with that God. But we only know that God is of a character to listen to confession, and to respond to it and to incorporate that which we confess within his ever changing plan for our lives; we only know these things on the basis of what we are told in scripture about God's revelation of himself in Christ. It's only because of the content of the scriptural message that the affirmation of faith, our prayer and our confession have any meaning at all. Because we have heard what scripture has to say about God, it makes sense to do these other things.

That's the main point: that scripture is foundational, and what follows scripture in the first half of the Eucharist service, we are permitted to do. We may hope these things to be effective, because of who God is as he is revealed in scripture.

OK, The human race has had many sorts of gods, what kind of a god are we to have here in Christianity? The kind of God we have, revealed in scripture, is a God in whom it makes sense to have faith, whose character encourages us to hope for his universal concern for all the creation and a God whose love means that confession as a means to restore a broken relationship is not only possible, but expected. But without the constant reminder of scripture about the character of God, it would soon cease to make sense to do these things.

Now, a couple of other comments, along the lines of miscellaneous ginger bread and decoration. These have to do with the ceremony of reading scriptural lessons. They are like parsley on top of a roast – decorative and an addition to our experience, but in no way essential to our nourishment.

One way to think about liturgy is that it always focuses somewhere. Liturgical actions don't take place in an ethereal never-never land that's just floating detached from the world. Eucharistic worship in particular is always focused on a where and a what. In the second half of the service the focus is right there, the elements on the altar. This is signaled by movement – my movement from the sidelines to behind the altar and the movement of bread and wine from a place of obscurity at the back of the worship area to a place of centrality on the altar. That's where the action takes place during the second half, on the altar. Each of these movements involves a shift in the congregation's center of attention. But during the first half of the service we could as well have the altar out of the room. And frankly, it shouldn't make much difference whether we did or not, because the altar isn't where the focus is.

I'm preaching to the choir, but I've seen something lately which irritates

me, so I'm going to be very self-indulgent and use this sermon as a means of expressing my frustration. I attended a service in which there was a gospel procession. Before the server and the gospeler walked down into the congregation the server took the rather large gospel book in his hand, held it before his face, turned to the altar, bowed with the book in his hands, turned around again and then proceeded down the aisle. Immensely clumsy and unnecessarily fussy. The real problem, liturgically, is that it presented a false emphasis. If you are going to bow to anything, you bow to the means by which the revelation of God comes – the name of Jesus, the altar on which the body and blood of Christ rest and so forth. But one only does this when the means of revelation is performing its function. And during the first half of the service it's the book of scripture readings, not the altar that is the means of revelation. So when you cross in front of the altar during the first half of the service carrying the gospel book, or any collection of readings, you don't bow to the altar. To do so is just plain wrong and shows that you don't understand what's happening in this part of the service. It confuses the congregation about what, at this point, is central. So if you stop and think about the principles of what the service is intended to communicate when, these ritual actions start to make sense. Never let me catch any of you bowing to the altar when you have the gospel book in your hands just before or after a gospel procession. Don't even let me catch you bowing when you cross in front of the altar to reach the ambo for reading the Old Testament or Epistle. Just go to the place where the center of action is to be with as little fuss and drawing as little attention to yourself as possible.

I don't think I have much to worry about at St. Anselm, but it is good for all of us to know what a true style is.

Now the three scripture lessons talk about three different stages in the story of salvation, which I somewhat facetiously call (1) get ready (preparation), (2) go (the event itself) and (3) aftermath. The Old Testament is preparation, getting ready for the coming of Jesus, the gospels record the central event of the incarnation, the story of the early church recorded the epistles is the beginning of the aftermath. So, one lesson to talk about getting ready, one to talk about the presence of Jesus, and one to talk about the life of the early church, which is the response to that preparation and event.

Every Sunday we sample the full range of the history of our salvation. But then the reading of the gospel is out of its logical order. Why? It should come second rather than third if we are to preserve the temporal structure of the revelation. It's out of order because of ancient ideas about honor. If something is going to be honored you stick it first or you stick it last, not in

the middle. The same with processions, the celebrant comes last, the cross first. So you have the two places of honor occupied with two, one hopes, honorable items.

So the gospel reading is out of order because the last place in a sequence of readings is the place of honor.

Some of you have undoubtedly seen this piece of symbolism during the announcement of the gospel reading. (Cross on forehead, on mouth and on chest) Like most physical acts of piety in the Episcopal Church, whether one does or doesn't do this is completely up to you, and that's the Episcopalian way.

What it means, of course, is that the gospel is to be considered with our minds, talked of with our mouths, and held in our hearts, Thinking, speaking, remembering.

The next piece ceremonial gingerbread has to do with the acclamations before and after the gospel. We've got "glory" and "praise." Which one comes first? Glory comes first, praise comes afterwards. There is a logical reason for that. Glory means God's self-expression, what humans can perceive, know and respond to about God. Now the gospels are the story of what humans can know, respond to and perceive about God. Therefore, when we say, "Glory to you, Lord Christ" it's both a prayer that the gospel fulfill its function of making God known to us, and a statement that in the gospel God is made known in Christ. "Glory to you," – may what we are about to hear truly reveal you to us. That's a prayer. "Glory to you," – in the reading which follows God is made known to those who have ears to hear. That's a statement of fact. So "Glory to you, Lord Christ." is an appropriate statement of preparation, and an appropriate prayer for preparation, both at the same time.

Afterwards, we assume that the gospel has been effective for us and that we have perceived there something of the true character and nature of God. And the response, of course, to that perception, is to praise the giver of the gift. Therefore, it makes sense to say "Glory to you . . ." before we hear the gospel because we are praying that the gospel be effective in doing what it is supposed to do in the liturgy. Afterwards, we say "Praise to you, Lord Christ" because we are assuming that the gospel has, in fact, done what it is supposed to do. And God allowing us to know Him is a matter for praise.

Now the very last piece of ceremonial gingerbread is a warning about another piece of bad taste. That is, all those folks who announce lessons and read the chapter and verse of the lesson during the announcement. There is one and only one circumstances under which that is appropriate and that is when the congregation is following along in pew bibles and need

the chapter and verse to find the right passage. Other than that, to give chapter and verse is a mere distraction by means of useless trivia.

Remember that we are announcing the word of God. But the chapter and verse designation is not part of the word of God. Only the content of scripture is the word of God. If chapter and verse is not needed for practical purposes, it puts us in a false position of actually claiming that those chapter and verse divisions are inherent in the structure of the text, and they're not, they were add to the text during the Protestant Reformation.

This addition of chapter and verse numbers to the Biblical text has a beneficial as well as a pernicious side. They make it much easier to find particular passages. They have also illegitimately affected our interpretation of the text. One is tempted to think that stories, or even sentences, stop at the end of chapters or verses. And they frequently don't. So it's important, at least for public worship, to approach scripture without this artificial addition of the Protestant Reformation.

One intent of chapter/verse divisions was to make scripture more easily usable in what we could generously call ecclesiastical disagreements. In other words, you need to be able to find your quotes fast to throw them at you opponent's heads. But if you are savoring scripture for the formation of your inner life, for the development of your sensitivity to the presence of God, for the informing of your morals, then I would hold the chapter and verse divisions not only irrelevant but, at least when listening to the reading of scripture out loud, inimicable. How would it sound if I were to read: "A lesson from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, Chapter 4: Verses 13 through 18. Verse 13: We would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep. Verse 14: That you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. Verse 15: For since we believe..." You see, that's horrible. And no one would ever do that. But what we would not do out loud there is a tendency to do silently if we aren't careful.

So in the understanding of scripture as read and heard, we are wiser to keep the chapter and verse designations out of it. If you want to learn them, there are far more efficient ways of doing so than their repetition in the process of public devotion.

Now that I have vented my spleen twice I thank you for your patience. Yet it's important to think, occasionally, about these relatively small things which are matters of style. In thinking about them, the community will develop a shared worship of true integrity. That has to be what we are after, and the priest cannot do it alone. I can't make our worship worship with integrity simply by means of how I do it. Worship is a communal project and its integrity depends on the actions of the community. That's why it's

so important for the community to think about what's going on. And to think, not only about the broad shape of the liturgy, but also, sometimes, about these little details. Do we understand what we are doing? Do we do it in such a way that the service flows from one point to the next, that the essential elements of the service are each highlighted and acknowledged as we move from one to another, and, finally and ultimately, does the service, which is supposed to represent in miniature the whole process of salvation, in fact do that? And does the basic shape of the liturgy, the basic shape of that salvation, become transparent to us during the process of our worship?